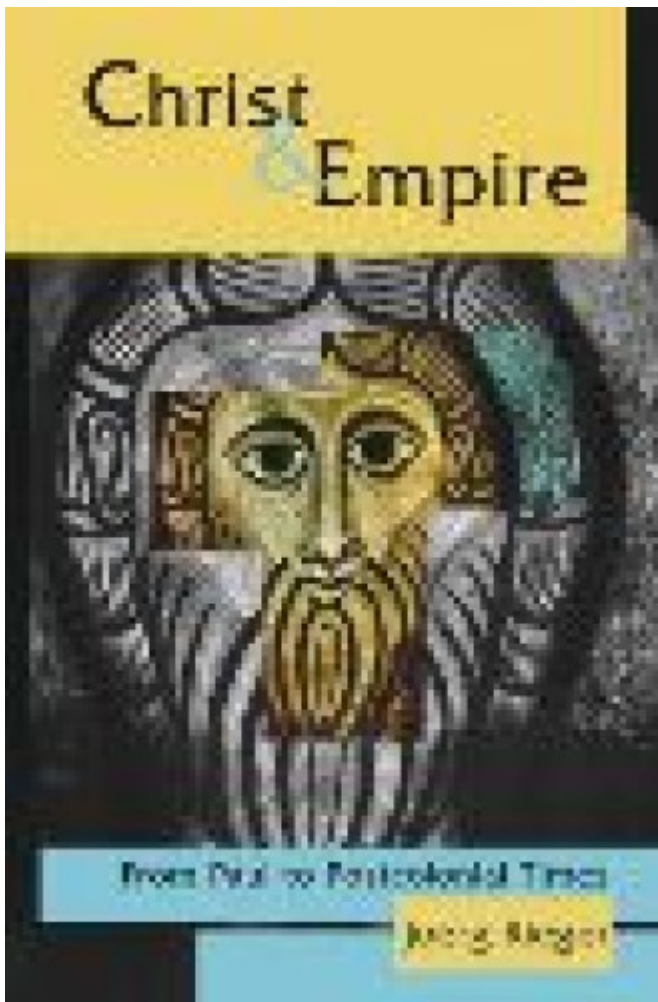


# Imperial assumptions

By [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [April 22, 2008](#) issue

## In Review



## Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times

Joerg Rieger  
Fortress

Every contemporary theological interpreter must come to terms with the fact that every interpretation is local and informed by context. Every interpretation carries

with it some ideological marking because no interpretation is, finally, disinterested. These two defining characteristics of postmodern interpretation—contextualism and awareness of ideological slant—have evoked a variety of rich discussions of hermeneutics and, more important, many new substantive interpretations of biblical texts and theological traditions.

Among these is a trajectory of postcolonial reading by scholars such as R. S. Sugirtharajah, Musa Dube and Pui-Lan Kwok, who now read in and for their own context. These interpreters depart in intentional ways from the interpretive assumptions and categories that have been imposed by scholars who reflect and serve dominant power.

Joerg Rieger, who teaches at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, is one of the foremost scholars who reflect on the new prospects for interpretation that are possible apart from the controlling “imperial” categories. (He is coeditor, with Pui-Lan Kwok and Don H. Compier, of *Empire and the Christian Tradition: New Readings of Classical Theologians*, published last year by Fortress.)

In this volume, Rieger offers seven historical studies of the way in which imperial assumptions have been operative in (or controlling for) the work of major figures or moments in the ongoing work of church interpretation. Scholars have long taken imperial interpretations as normative, of course, without any awareness of the assumptions that have been decisive for their interpretations.

Rieger’s twofold thesis is that “our images of Christ have been shaped by empire” but that “Christ could never be co-opted altogether by empire”—that “images of the top-down Christ have not managed to block out alternative visions of Christ completely.” The first of these judgments is one we perhaps expect in a postcolonial perspective. The second is a surprise that indicates how careful and discerning a reader Rieger is.

Rieger takes up, in turn, the theology of Paul; the Chalcedonian formula under Constantine; Anselm of Canterbury; Bartolomé de las Casas, a Jesuit missionary in the New World; Friedrich Schleiermacher; Gustav Aulén, a Swedish bishop who authored a definitive work on the meaning of the atonement; and, finally, Matthew Fox. Of these studies, each of which can stand alone as a suggestive piece of historical investigation, I will comment on two that are especially interesting and illuminating and that are representative of Rieger’s approach in all seven chapters.

The second chapter is preoccupied with the formulation of *homoousia* and the affirmation that Christ is coequal with God. Rieger considers coequality one of the “hierarchical assumptions” of imperial politicians who celebrated transcendent power: the emperor proposed a formula that kept power transcendent and unavailable to human history.

Rieger’s judgment is that the formula of coequality does “not give enough room to Jesus’ humanity”; rather, it reflects and serves imperial assumptions about power that were shared by those in the center of theology and politics, in the interest of unity and homogeneity.

But Rieger finds here, as in the events he covers in every chapter, a “surplus” of gospel reality after imperial interpretation has done its best. In this case, following Peter Brown, he suggests that the joining of God and humanity in the person of Christ by “mysterious extension” joins God “to the persons of the poor,” a joining that makes possible resistance to the very notion of elite power in the empire.

As elsewhere, Rieger finds in the formula of coequality an angle that cuts against the very assumptions that produced the formula in the first place. It is this juxtaposition of imperial claim and evangelical surplus that stands at the center of his analysis—and that sets this effort apart from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s in *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Fortress, 2007).

In his study of Anselm and his famous theory of atonement, Rieger places the bishop in an “honor-shame society” of theologians who reflect on how honor is restored to a lord who has been shamed by a lesser person. In Anselm’s highly ordered hierarchical society, the redress of a lord’s honor requires a generous receptivity on the part of the lord and a costly gesture of submission on the part of the affronting peasant. Both parties, perforce, must participate in the redress of honor.

Rieger suggests that Anselm’s account of the atonement of the God-man reflects the “ontology of the empire,” which offers a relational transaction of redress that requires the participation of both parties to arrive at satisfaction and restoration of a proper hierarchical order, and in which due honor is accorded to those at the top of the social pyramid. This analysis suggests that the popular understanding of a “theory of satisfaction” grossly distorts Anselm’s intention; the new analysis requires that he be understood in his own time and place.

Again Rieger finds surplus that resists empire because the analogue presents God as an active partner in a mutual transaction not unlike the relational transactions of liberation theology. (In the cases of both Chalcedon and Anselm, Rieger ends his discussion by noticing the accent on solidarity that in contemporary thought is linked to a liberation hermeneutic.)

In every case Rieger is able to point out dimensions of christological formulation that serve to subvert the imperial assumptions that are primary in the formulation. I have no way of assessing the reliability of Rieger's particular historical judgments, but it is clear that with the acute theological sense that he brings from a postcolonial perspective, Rieger insists on reading in context—and in all of the cases he cites, the context is that of empire. Given this context, it is remarkable that Rieger can see the ways in which the political assumptions and outcomes of theological formulation are domesticated. Indeed, his examples fit well a practice of domestication even though the christological formulation contains its own subversion.

Rieger's historical study is of importance for what we may learn afresh about the history of theological formulation. Also, his accent on imperial assumptions has immense importance for doing theology in the current U.S. scene, saturated as it is with imperial assumptions that arise from the reality of the military globalism of the United States.

Rieger, of course, is not unaware of these connections, for he several times cites the ideology of Dick Cheney as a contemporary counterpoint to early imperial assumptions. The book alerts readers to their own imperial assumptions about theology—which are shared but left unacknowledged by liberal clergy and conservative parishioners alike. The ambiguity of empire in the theological tradition is an urgent subject for our critical self-awareness, and Rieger's book is a powerful exemplar of how such issues may be raised.